

Central Intelligence Agency



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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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China-India Border Tensions: Origins and Prospects [redacted]

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Summary

Beijing's establishment of a forward base on Wangdung Ridge last summer--in response to what the Chinese perceived as an Indian military buildup on the disputed border--has precipitated the first significant military tension between China and India in 10 years. Although no fighting has occurred, in November relations deteriorated [redacted]

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[redacted] Tensions have probably eased since mid-November, but Chinese and Indian outposts are still within 1 kilometer of each other, and the danger of isolated skirmishes remains. Largely in keeping with earlier conversions in the northeast, India's Parliament passed legislation in December altering the status of Arunachal Pradesh from a Union territory to full statehood. If no diplomatic solution is found by this spring to assuage Chinese concerns that New Delhi is attempting to impose its own border demarcation by force and legislation, Beijing will probably back up its demarches with a larger show of force, raising the prospects for a military confrontation. [redacted]

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This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] Office of East Asian Analysis, [redacted] Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis. Information available as of 29 January 1987 was used in its preparation. Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, International Security Branch, China Division, OEA, [redacted]

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A Forward Post Is Established

The latest Sino-Indian imbroglio dates from the Chinese establishment of a permanent infantry outpost on Wanaduna Ridge in disputed territory earlier last summer.¹ [redacted] Beijing built the outpost in reaction to Indian troop deployments over the past year and military flights encroaching on the line of actual control (LAC), established by Beijing after the 1962 war (see appendix on "A Question of Lines" for further information).

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- Since 1983, [redacted] the Indians have constructed three new bases and six new helipads near Wanaduna [redacted]

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The Indian Government countered the Chinese move by strengthening its forces deployed near the disputed area. Indian officials also briefed the Indian press just prior to the seventh round of border talks on the alleged 8-kilometer Chinese incursion into the Arunachal Pradesh Union Territory. [redacted]

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The Chinese outpost is probably also intended to show Beijing's irritation with what it perceived as Indian intransigence at the negotiating table. At the sixth round of border talks in November 1985, Chinese and Indian negotiators for the first time discussed competing claims in this eastern sector. A stalemate immediately developed.

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[redacted] We believe Beijing may have calculated that a show of military strength last June would lead to some movement at the seventh round of talks in July, but no progress was reported. [redacted]

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New Delhi's plans to declare Arunachal Pradesh a full-fledged state of India--actually accomplished in December 1986--may have further influenced Beijing's decision. China probably perceives such legislation declaring the disputed eastern territory an inalienable part of India as weakening China's bargaining position. The establishment of the outpost, therefore, reemphasized Beijing's claim prior to the Indian Parliament's passage of the legislation. [redacted]

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¹ The fielding of S-70C helicopters--commercial versions of the US Army's Black Hawk troop transport--and French Super Puma helicopters in Tibet may have provided the Chinese military the means to create a permanent forward base. Before the delivery in 1985 of the Black Hawks and Super Pumas, year-round supply for these isolated troops would have been difficult. [redacted]

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The Border Heats Up In November

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We believe Beijing sees the border dispute as a purely bilateral issue. The sequence of events is such that we think it unlikely that China manufactured the incident to introduce greater strains into Indian-Soviet relations. We have no evidence that new Soviet overtures to China affected Beijing's calculations and, indeed, the Wangdung outpost was created well in advance of Gorbachev's new initiatives on China. Similarly, we have no evidence that China established the post at Pakistan's behest.

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India Soft Pedals Dispute

New Delhi refused to accept Beijing's November diplomatic demarches, but suggested that both sides could avoid such unfortunate military confrontations by renewing their efforts to negotiate a settlement of their territorial disputes. Indian Government officials have answered opposition politicians' questions in Parliament with the same refusal to accept Chinese claims and conciliatory statements about the future of bilateral relations.

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New Delhi almost certainly wants to avoid a major deterioration in relations with China that would leave it exposed just as India is trying to balance relations with the superpowers and Moscow is approaching Beijing. Rajiv Gandhi has made an effort to assure the Indian public that New Delhi will protect India's interests at the same time he has left the door open to substantive negotiations. On 19 December Gandhi reiterated New Delhi's hardline stance that China must return the Indian territory occupied by Beijing, and stated that a final settlement of the border dispute depends on Chinese withdrawal. He added, however, that border problems should not interfere with efforts to improve relations in other areas.

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History of the Formal Negotiations

China and India began border negotiations in December 1981. No progress was made during the first four rounds of negotiations because the two sides tabled incompatible approaches. India advocated sector-by-sector negotiations, while China suggested a territorial swap--India could have title to the eastern sector (Arunachal Pradesh) if China kept the western sector (Aksai Chin). At the fifth round in 1984, Beijing acquiesced to India's demand for sector-by-sector discussions on the condition that the final agreement be comprehensive. This opened the way for the first substantive negotiations.

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At the sixth round of talks in November 1985, China surprised India with a proposal that New Delhi make territorial concessions in the eastern boundary sector, raising a formidable obstacle to progress. Previous Chinese statements on a package border settlement had suggested essentially a swap of territory that would confirm the British-drawn McMahon Line alignment in the east in exchange for Indian recognition of Chinese claims (and control) in Aksai Chin.

- Indian Foreign Ministry officials charged that the Chinese changed the rules by proposing mutual concessions as the basis for sector-by-sector negotiations.
- Chinese officials maintain that as long as India refuses to make concessions in the east the Chinese will concede nothing in the west.

The seventh round in July 1986 saw no progress because of the establishment and discovery of the Chinese outpost at Wangdung.

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Chronology of Border Talks

First Round	December 1981	Beijing
Second Round	May 1982	New Delhi
Third Round	29 January-- 2 February 1983	Beijing
Fourth Round	October 1983	New Delhi
Fifth Round	September 1984	Beijing
Sixth Round	November 1985	New Delhi
Seventh Round	July 1986	Beijing

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Current Status of Forces

In the immediate area under dispute, Indian forces have the upper hand. More than eight permanent Indian camps house perhaps 3,000 Indian soldiers. These camps are near the southernmost Chinese positions, consisting of 300 Chinese soldiers on Wangdung Ridge and a base camp nearby. Comparative troop levels in the region also favor India, with major elements of one Indian mountain division--15,000 troops--based north of Tawang less than 30 kilometers from Wangdung Ridge, and positioned to block a Chinese breakthrough. Indian commanders near the disputed area have moved aggressively since last June to establish and maintain tactical superiority. [redacted] four additional Indian mountain divisions--including four artillery brigades--are positioned in the Northeast within 300 kilometers of Wangdung. These total more than 36,000 troops. [redacted]

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In contrast, Chinese reinforcements available in Tibet probably number fewer than 20,000 troops, organized into two infantry brigades, two border defense regiments, and one artillery regiment within 300 kilometers of Wangdung Ridge. The bulk of these forces could probably be deployed for combat near Wangdung Ridge within 30 days. Both Chinese and Indian local troops are well trained and acclimatized to high-altitude conditions. [redacted]

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The Lessons of the Past

Despite similarities between events of the past six months and those that preceded the 1962 Sino-Indian war, fundamental differences exist. Indian border policy and hawkish official statements before the 1962 clash belied actual preparations to defend the border. New Delhi apparently believed that its good relations with Beijing--India championed China's admission to the United Nations following the Korean war--would restrain China from using force. Thus, while India's Prime Minister Nehru sought to assuage public opinion by promising to "defend the border to the last man and the last bullet," fewer than 2,000 troops were based near Wangdung Ridge. After an Indian battalion crossed the Chinese line of control, two Chinese divisions (20,000 troops) achieved a breakthrough in the Wangdung area, they advanced the 200 kilometers to the Brahmaputra Valley almost unopposed. [redacted]

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Other marked differences between the two episodes are the more limited scope of the present dispute, and the absence of regional tensions that contributed to the 1962 border war. The Chinese attacks of 1962 were also directed at the disputed boundary along the Aksai Chin region some 1,000 kilometers northwest of Wangdung Ridge. At present, there are no indications of increased tensions near Aksai Chin. Moreover, the 1962 clash occurred against the backdrop of the 1959 Tibet uprising--put down by Chinese troops--which raised the specter of a militarily resurgent China on India's doorstep. [redacted]

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Beijing's primary strategic advantage is its ability to commit large numbers of troops without significantly degrading security along China's other borders. As many as 60,000 troops could be dispatched to the disputed area within 60 days, probably from the 13th Group Army based near the city of Chengdu. Reinforcements could be dispatched even more quickly if Beijing committed elements of the 15th Airborne Army, an elite light infantry force well suited to mountain warfare. With 93 main force infantry divisions and 24 artillery brigades, as many as 20 Chinese infantry divisions and seven artillery brigades--almost 300,000 troops--could be available against India within the first six months of a conflict and still leave the bulk of its four million troops in place along the Soviet and Vietnamese frontiers. Long resupply lines, however, would constrain the length of time Beijing could support such large numbers of forces at this front. []

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In contrast, India's ability to reinforce forces in the northeast is limited. A 5,000-man parachute brigade could be dispatched immediately, and three mountain divisions--45,000 combat troops--in other northeastern territories could reinforce the divisions closest to the border within a month. As many as six additional infantry divisions--75,000 troops--stationed in central and southern India could be deployed to the northeast. Many Indian troops--especially in the northeast--are committed to internal security duties, and the vast majority of India's million-man Army is committed against the always tense Pakistani border. []

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Indian supply lines are a potentially important weakness because there are no roads linking Tawang to Wangdung Ridge--a one-week march. Indian supplies, reinforcements, and medical evacuations are largely limited to helicopter airlift and airdrops, which, while adequate thus far, will be severely restricted by the onset of winter weather.³ The Chinese have a good local road network, which was a decisive advantage during the September-November 1962 border clash, and a road-served garrison less than three miles from Wangdung. During winter months, however, heavy snowfall is likely to severely restrict ground arteries and limit both sides to clear-weather aerial resupply. Efforts by either side to move substantial reinforcements during a widened confrontation would probably be constrained by existing supply networks, which consist of long transportation routes and limited air transport capabilities. []

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The air balance favors India, but is unlikely to be very important outside of a general conflict. []

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² Chinese or Indian troops sent to reinforce mountain forces would require a prolonged acclimatization period--as much as six weeks--to fight or maneuver effectively at high altitudes. The Indian garrison at Tawang, for example, is 3,000 meters--almost 10,000 feet--above sea level, and much of the terrain surrounding Wangdung Ridge is more than 5,000 meters (16,000 feet) above sea level. []

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Flight operations of Chinese and Indian aircraft would be largely limited to clear-weather, daylight missions, and neither side is likely to enjoy overall air superiority. The primary impact of air operations probably would be the disruption of fragile Chinese and Indian supply lines, constricting the flow of men and materiel to forward positions. [REDACTED]

China's Southwestern Theater Commander

Commander of Chengdu Military Region since June 1985, Fu Quanyou is not the kind of officer who backs away from a fight. One of four new military region commanders appointed during the 1985 reorganization of China's armed forces, Fu oversees the military region responsible for maintaining China's limited but sustained military pressure against the Vietnamese. As commander of the 1st Army in early 1985, he apparently won Beijing's admiration when his troops conducted some of the fiercest and bloodiest battles with the Vietnamese since the 1979 war. Fu visited forward defense units near the Indian border last July, ostensibly for the PLA anniversary. [REDACTED]

Indian Commanders in the Northeast

Lieutenant General Jitendra Kumar Puri has been General Officer in Command, Eastern Command, since January 1986. He appears to have had a competent, though not particularly outstanding, career--having served on a brigade staff in the northeast during the 1962 Sino-Indian War, headed a division support command in the 1965 Indo-Pakistani War, and taught at the Defense Services Staff College during the 1971 Indo-Pakistani War. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Prospects

In our judgment, the chances for hostilities in the near term have lessened slightly, although the danger remains that isolated skirmishes could erupt and quickly involve most of the forces near Wangdung. Barring a spontaneous outbreak of fighting, we believe weather conditions will impede major reinforcement of current forces until late April or May. We believe both sides are inclined to limit military activities to improving the present bivouac sites.

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In the less likely event that hostilities were to erupt soon, fighting would probably slowly escalate from shooting incidents involving at first only small-arms fire. In our judgment, infantry skirmishes would be severely limited by the mountainous terrain and the likelihood of heavy snowfall in the next few weeks. We believe further combat would probably be drawn out and indecisive, consisting largely of artillery duels. Extensive Indian preparations, numerical superiority, and ability to base artillery on tactical high ground would probably ensure that Indian forces could capture Wangdung Ridge if the fighting escalated. It is possible that fighting on this scale would shock both sides into ceasing military provocations and result in a return to border talks. However, Beijing might be compelled to respond to an Indian victory at Wangdung Ridge by committing the 52nd and 53rd Infantry Brigades--the only readily available reinforcements based in Tibet.

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In the Spring

If the current stalemate persists and no diplomatic progress is made by spring, we believe Beijing will probably back up its demarches with a buildup of forces and more aggressive patrolling of the LAC. We believe the Chinese might also deploy fighter aircraft to Tibet to counter possible future Indian air incursions. By calling in the Indian Ambassador to Beijing in December and January for a third and fourth demarche, the Chinese may be laying the diplomatic foundation for a more aggressive border policy this spring.

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In our judgment, China sees New Delhi's decision to declare Arunachal Pradesh a state despite the current border confrontation as the latest in a list of unresolved grievances. Beijing probably views Indian recalcitrance as a challenge to China's regional stature. As demonstrated by China's ongoing military pressure against Vietnam,⁴ Beijing is willing to use border skirmishes to emphasize political points. Chinese troops are unlikely to take the offensive on Wangdung Ridge, however, until they enjoy a better tactical situation against the Indians.

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Several factors restrain the prospects for large-scale Chinese actions at Wangdung. Beijing is probably unwilling to sidetrack its economic and military modernization programs with a major military confrontation against India. Although Beijing's campaign of military pressure against Vietnam demonstrates a willingness to use force, Chinese leaders are almost certainly aware that a confrontation with New Delhi would be a vastly more risky venture. Beijing's perceptions of Indo-Soviet and Indo-US relations, and New Delhi's prominence in the Nonaligned Movement would complicate China's calculations of the fallout of military actions.

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Despite their current tactical superiority in the immediate area, we believe the Indians are not likely to press their advantage against Chinese forces this spring except in response to an attack. Indian forces probably will, however, be alert to any Chinese tactical movements that would allow them to regain control of the Wangdung Ridge or a




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comparable piece of territory. New Delhi probably would prefer to return to border talks holding the ground it held before June 

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We expect New Delhi to press Beijing to forgo further military moves in the disputed area and to schedule the eighth round of bilateral talks. The Indians are also likely to call public attention to any progress the two sides make in strengthening economic and cultural relations to reintroduce some positive momentum before a resumption of the prickly border talks. New Delhi will closely watch the border talks between Beijing and Moscow scheduled for next month for any signs that the two sides could improve relations sufficiently to lead to a diminution of Soviet support to India. Fears of such a development could compel New Delhi to intensify both defensive military preparations and diplomatic efforts to improve relations with Beijing. It is possible that as the Indians become preoccupied with prospects for Sino-Soviet rapprochement, New Delhi might ask Washington to assist on the diplomatic front 

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Appendix

A Question of Lines

The British attempted to demarcate the colonial borders of India with China and Tibet in the early 1900s, but ultimately only added to the confusion. The British-drawn McMahon Line in the eastern sector of the Sino-Indian border coincides in some areas with the highest peaks and passes marking the watershed between major river systems in India and Tibet. In the area of current dispute and some other areas, however, rivers have their headwaters north of the boundary in southern Tibet, and a border following the water divide would have placed some segments of the border as much as 50 miles more northward. In the area of Wangdung, the British drew a straight line on a crude map to keep control of defensible ground, and provided no detailed written description of the boundary alignment. []

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At the 1914 Simla Conference, attended by representatives of Great Britain, China, and Tibet, the McMahon Line was presented as the new boundary. Great Britain and Tibet, the latter considered by the British to be politically autonomous at the time, signed the agreement. The Chinese delegate only initialed the agreement, noting he lacked the authority to commit China, which later repudiated it. []

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Beijing contends that the true border lies far to the south of the "illegal" McMahon Line, approximately following the break between the foothills of the Himalayas and the Brahmaputra Valley. This area encompasses much of the newly created Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh. Since the 1962 war, in lieu of a border agreement, the Chinese have recognized a line of actual control (LAC), which lies south of the Wangdung Ridge and north of the British-drawn McMahon Line. In their unilateral cease-fire of November 1962, the Chinese withdrew to positions 20 kilometers north of the LAC and warned New Delhi not to try to reoccupy areas north of the LAC. []

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Not surprisingly, the major area where the Indian claims and the Chinese LAC differ in the eastern sector lies in the zone where the Chinese set up their outpost this summer. New Delhi argues that the true boundary line between India and China in the current disputed area lies north of the Wangdung Ridge. Although Survey of India maps published through 1959 showed the western extremity of the McMahon Line, where it joins the Bhutan border, at the same latitude as that of the British-drawn boundary, the Indian description of the McMahon Line that was given to Chinese officials in 1960 did not correspond with the location of the line as shown on the Simla map. Instead, the description placed the western extremity of the boundary about three miles north of the earlier version. The discrepancy appears to be explained by the fact that Indian ground and aerial surveys after 1959 provided New Delhi with more accurate information about the location of terrain features. []

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CHINA-INDIA BORDER TENSIONS: ORIGINS AND PROSPECTS



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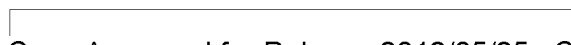
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